

Using Speech

It's All About the Caller

By Robin Springer

In this electronic era with wireless PDAs, email and the Internet, where on the urgency scale is your telephone as a must-have? According to the Gartner Group, 92% of business transactions are completed over the phone, so it's pretty high up there.

Call centers handle as many as 55 million calls each day internationally, with live agents accounting for as much as 70% of the cost of the call. Decreasing the cost per call by minimizing live agent involvement can decrease call cost from as much as \$15 per call to less than a dollar per call but this needs to be accomplished without compromising the perception of customer service.

ScanSoft estimates their customers who deploy ASR see ROI in an average of 9.5 months with an average savings of more than \$1 million. Nuance reports similar savings. The statistics sound great. ASR saves time. ASR saves money. ASR is good.

I asked a few Los Angelinos what they thought about ASR. With responses ranging from, "(I) don't use it," to, "I've never had to talk to a robot," I tasked these individuals with calling at least one company that employs ASR and then spoke with them again. Interestingly, the actual experience was more positive than the perception. It appears this is because the users did not differentiate between IVR in general and ASR in specific, recognizing real human agents as one category and everything else (IVR, ASR, DTMF, Robot, etc.) as the other.

I take the view that it is important for people deploying systems to make systems people can

use and not have to work to use the system. My test group liked or would like to see the following features in future iterations of ASR:

- Explain what users can expect. For many callers this is their initiation into ASR and we all know the importance of a positive first impression. Describe the process briefly and provide a "skip" prompt for users who want to bypass the introduction.
- Make the opt-out obvious. It doesn't have to be the first thing we hear from name-your-robot, but it's nice to know it's there and, if we know how easy it is to access we may press on, or speak on in this case, to attempt completion of the call.
- Include profanity in the grammars. If the caller is swearing at a virtual operator, he is not happy. Route him to a live agent. The same goes for prosody.
- Offer the option of using voice or touch tone input. For the user who likes to multi-task; tracking an order with Dell Computers while eating lunch at his desk, it would be helpful to have the option. This also serves as an additional access mode for users with disabilities. Very good information

ASR got high marks for calculating postage from the United States Postal Service, verifying departures and arrivals from the airlines, and transferring to an extension by saying a name instead of pushing buttons on the keypad. When the tasks become more complex, such navi-

gating to the correct department of a corporation, the communication breakdown appeared to result from poor call flow not from inadequate recognition.

For example, in this day and age is it really so difficult to route a call without making users disconnect? If users are asked whether they want Department A or Department B, it's not endearing to be instructed to hang up and dial another number. And, if your "robot" is going to remind callers to say help if they need it, don't send them back to the main menu to start the labyrinth from scratch.

Implementation of ASR is still relatively new. As we accumulate experience in interface design and as laggards adapt to the new technology we can have a meeting of the minds and build from there.

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- 1 Voice Automation: Past, Present, and Future. Datamonitor July 2003
- 2 Nuance Communications Inc. 2004



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